

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

July 26, 2018

The Honorable Betsy DeVos
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary DeVos,

We are writing to request information on how the Department of Education is working to close the “digital divide” to ensure students across the country have equitable access to affordable, broadband internet in school and at home. While we are encouraged by the President’s September 2017 memo affirming the Administration’s commitment to increasing STEM and computer science education access, realizing the promise of educational technology must start with equitable, affordable access to high-speed broadband internet.

Exposing students to cutting-edge technology can improve educational outcomes, open doors for job opportunities, fill critical needs in the STEM fields, and benefit the growing American economy. Increasing academic achievement is reliant on effectively implementing digital learning resources both in school and at home. While broadband is now available to 92.3% of the United States, accessibility and affordability still remain major barriers to adoption. Students without access to broadband internet at home or school risk falling behind their peers academically creating a digital divide that increasingly limits opportunities available for students and disproportionately restricts low-income, minority, and rural groups.

Detroit is an example of a city fighting for equitable access to technology. In 2016, the National Digital Inclusion Alliance ranked Detroit as the second-worst connected city in the United States (behind Brownsville, Texas) where 56.72% of households have no fixed broadband and an estimated 7 in 10 of school-aged children have no internet access at home. This alarming pattern, repeated across the country, is disproportionately found in low-income populations, minority groups, and rural communities. In 2015 for children ages 3 to 18, 26% of black children and 28% of Hispanic children did not have internet access at home compared to 14% of white children, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce. When examining family income, the higher the family income, the likelihood of an at-home broadband internet connection increases.

The long-delayed April 2018 report by the National Center for Education Statistics identified affordability as the most common barrier to access. Aggressive efforts to coordinate federal resources are needed to create equitable access to broadband and close the digital divide. In 2013, President Obama announced the ConnectED Initiative with the ambitious goal to ensure

99% of all students in the United States have equitable access to broadband by 2018. The groundbreaking initiative prompted collaboration between various federal agencies to promote partnerships that expanded broadband access to schools, students, and teachers. As of December 2016, the initiative had successfully leveraged private-sector partnerships to provide a range of educational technologies to students and under the former Administration was on track towards its broadband goal by the end of 2018. Since taking office, President Trump has publicly called for increased cutting-edge technology, STEM education, and investing in our nation's infrastructure. Investments in cutting edge technology is critical for our future, but it must begin with equitable access to these resources and tools.

We ask that the Department prioritize closing the digital divide and actively collaborate with relevant authorities to expand technology access that directly invests in underserved children. We are also requesting answers on the Department's work to close the digital divide under the Trump Administration to the following inquiries:

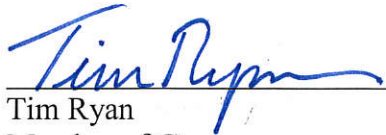
1. What programs and/or initiatives are being carried out by the Department of Education to increase equitable technology access to all students, whether at home or at school?
2. Please describe the concrete steps the Department is taking to effectively implement the September 2017 Presidential Memorandum on "Increasing Access to High-Quality STEM and Computer Science Education" in a manner that accounts for the digital divide and is fully applicable to all students, not just the most privileged who already have the means to access the required technology.
3. To what extent is the Department of Education collaborating with relevant federal agencies (e.g., Federal Communications Commissions, Department of Commerce, Department of Agriculture, etc) to expand equitable, affordable technology access to students at home and in school? Further, please provide ways that your Department can improve their efforts on interagency cooperation to address the technology access needs of students.
4. Please explain how the Department is addressing this issue specifically for minorities, low-income populations, and underserved areas. Please clarify if there are disaggregated efforts to address different demographics such as race, ethnicity, geographic location, income-level, age, or gender.
5. Please describe any additional steps the Department plans to take to fix tech inequity and close the digital divide to ensure our students are prepared with the technological skills to enter the 21st century workforce.

Improving technology access is imperative to ensure every student across the country has an equitable opportunity for a high-quality education. Thank you for your attention to this critical issue affecting our nation's students and I look forward to your detailed response.

Sincerely,



Brenda L. Lawrence
Member of Congress



Tim Ryan
Member of Congress



Dina Titus
Member of Congress



Bobby Rush
Member of Congress



Lisa Blunt Rochester
Member of Congress



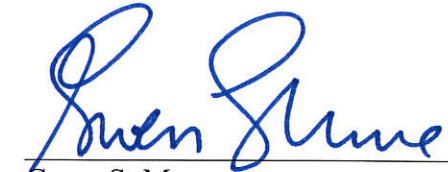
Joyce Beatty
Member of Congress



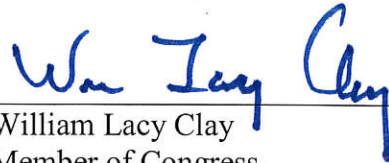
Hakeem S. Jeffries
Member of Congress



Eddie Bernice Johnson
Member of Congress



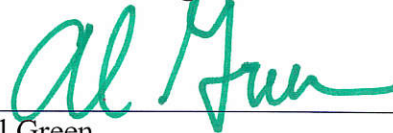
Gwen S. Moore
Member of Congress



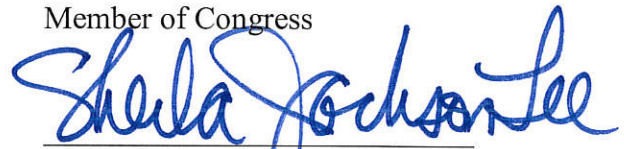
William Lacy Clay
Member of Congress



Hank Johnson
Member of Congress



Al Green
Member of Congress



Sheila Jackson Lee
Member of Congress



A. Donald McEachin
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Dwight Evans
Member of Congress



Elijah E. Cummings
Member of Congress



Donald M. Payne Jr.
Member of Congress



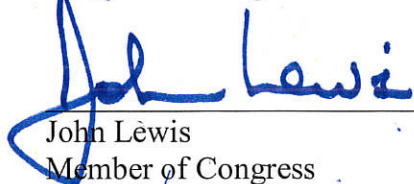
Gregory W. Meeks
Member of Congress



G.K. Butterfield
Member of Congress



Alcee L. Hastings
Member of Congress



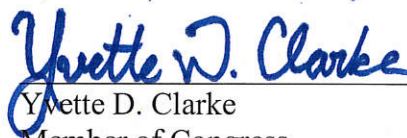
John Lewis
Member of Congress



Karen Bass
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Yvette D. Clarke
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Jacky Rosen
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